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ABSTRACT

This document describes how public education has been a tremendous success for millions of children. It outlines the crucial role played by public education and how, in many cases, public schools are the only place where children receive care, sustenance, safety, and the opportunity to learn. The grand American tradition of public education began with Jefferson's ideal of an aristocracy based on talent and not on inherited wealth and privilege. Ever since its inception, this grand tradition of public education has undergone significant changes. It has been a crucial part of the immigrant experience, allowing the children of first-generation Americans to achieve a level of success that would not have been possible in their native countries. Indeed, education has produced a level of social mobility that is unmatched in most countries. It is public education that helps create a shared culture that is essential in any democracy. Public education also nurtures the financial health of any society and leads to the betterment of those who take full advantage of education's offerings. But education has come under full attack in the last 20 years, and although public education faces many challenges, its detractors fail to appreciate its many strengths and how it has shaped our culture. (Contains 10 references.) (RJM)

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Joan Kowal
M. Donald Thomas

2003

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What's Right with Public Education

Joan Kowal
and M. Donald Thomas

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EA 032 569

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Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

What's Right with Public Education

by
Joan P. Kowal
and
M. Donald Thomas

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Foreword

> After studying elementary schools, visiting them, discussing them, and consulting with some of the country's leading educators, I conclude that American elementary education is not menaced by a "rising tide of mediocrity." It is, overall, in pretty good shape.
>
> William J. Bennett
> *First Lessons*, 1989

That's what's right with American public schools: they are in "pretty good shape," not only in elementary education, but in secondary education as well. Our secondary schools are the finest in the world.

Critics of public education generally are ignorant of our history, exaggerate weaknesses, and use fear-laden, inflammatory language to describe public education. This rhetoric serves a specific, conservative, political purpose. Much of what these critics say is intended to weaken public support for education, especially more expensive education services for the impoverished and for those with special needs. Many of the same critics do not believe in educating well *all* of our nation's children.

In the United States the struggle over public education is between those who believe in the elitist principle

of educating only "the best and the brightest" and others who support quality public education for all. Access to public education is protected by Amendment XIV of the U.S. Constitution, Section 1: No State "shall deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." Thus, we have an obligation for the education of all children, including illegal immigrants. They, too, are persons deserving the equal protection of the laws.

Finally, we have two courageous educators able to discuss the facts and modify the ideas of misguided critics. Kowal and Thomas present convincing evidence of what is right with our schools. The authors apply the economic principle often used by school critics — a rising tide raises all ships — to public education. The challenge is not to dismantle our schools; rather, it is one of providing adequate financial support to all of them. Specifically, this nation must provide adequate resources to those in low-wealth areas and in poor urban centers suffering from "municipal overburden."

This fastback will be of interest not only to educators, but also to public officials who support appropriate public education policy. It also may help to slow the tide of criticism leveled at public education.

Within these few pages is the case for public education: its contribution to social mobility, economic stability, and improvement in the quality of life. Education has been and will continue to be the vehicle for millions of children to enjoy a better life socially and economically. More important, education will continue to be the foundation for an effective democracy and a just society.

H. Dale Holden
H. Dale Holden & Associates

Introduction

> Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5,000 years, the right to learn, is undoubtedly the most fundamental. . . . The freedom to learn. . . . has been bought by bitter sacrifice. And whatever we may think of the curtailment of other civil rights, we should fight to the last ditch to keep open the right to learn, the right to have examined in our schools not only what we believe, but what we do not believe; not only what our leaders say, but what the leaders of other groups and nations, and the leaders of other centuries have said. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be.
>
> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Freedom to Learn"

W.E.B. Du Bois believed public education to be "the most fundamental" civil right. David Tyack called it "The One Best System." Horace Mann said, "The public school is the greatest discovery made by man." "Public education," wrote Hubert H. Humphrey,

"is a great enterprise, but it is also the highest yield investment that this nation can make."

If this is not sufficient, read what Harry S Truman wrote:

> The bulwark of our free institutions, of course, is based on a public education system where every person, no matter what his station, may have access to education. Our public school system has been a shining success in the history of our nation. (Ferrell 1980)

One of the authors has a file in which are several hundred letters extolling the virtues of public education. Among these is one written by a Salt Lake City school patron: "In the United States every child can go to school. As a parent of a handicapped child, I thank God for the American education way."

For us public education is the Grand Tradition. It is a saga without an ending. It is ever changing, evolving, nurturing the aspirations, discoveries, and talents of each new generation. For the most part, our schools have provided noble service to the nation.

If there is a blot in the history of schooling, it is the neglect of schooling for the poor, particularly those in low-wealth school districts and those in poor urban centers. This is a tragedy that should shock the conscience of our state and national leaders, as it has influenced the recent decisions of a large number of state supreme courts. People living in these neglected areas have little political clout and even less sophistication to influence education policy.

Public education has been an awesome success for millions of our children. That it has not provided an

equal education for some is not a criticism of public schools. Rather, it is an indictment of insensitive public policy. But there are voices that cry out for equal educational opportunities for all of our children. In its report, *Giving Youth a Better Chance,* the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education stated that while higher education has continued to obtain greater financial support, the same has not been true for public education. And the supreme courts in a large number of states have ruled that education funding is both inadequate and unequally distributed.

To fully understand the tragic harm many children suffer in poor urban America, one needs only to read Jonathan Kozol's three books: *Death at an Early Age, Savage Inequalities,* and *Amazing Grace.* Another significant resource is the annual reports of the Children's Defense Fund. And if these are not enough, visits to schools in both poor rural areas and the inner core of our great cities will certainly convince most reasonable people that the devastation faced by children in these areas is a national disgrace.

Public schools may be the only place where such children receive care, sustenance, safety, and the opportunity to learn. Such schools serve as an oasis of hope in neighborhoods long neglected and now infested with drug addiction, depression, lack of adequate food and shelter, pests, and desperation. That some escape the disease, death, or incarceration is a tribute to the influence of the local neighborhood school.

There is much wrong with our public policies, especially their effect on children, that prevents public education

from being more effective than it already is. David Tyack says it best:

> I do not share the view that urban schools have abysmally declined; this is an exaggeration as misleading as the mindless optimism of those who recently saw only progress. (1974, p. 11)
>
> In a more just and egalitarian society, some kind of [public] schooling would continue to be essential. (p. 289)

American public education has been a long and noble crusade against ignorance. It also has been a dream to establish equity for all children and young people. It is this wise effort to eradicate ignorance and establish equity that we call the Grand Tradition.

The Grand Tradition has been appreciated under many other names. It has been called "a crusade," "a mission," "a rendezvous with destiny," and "the American dream." Educators have understood its meaning. They worked hard and long to give the tradition a firm footing in the soil of a new nation. Today American public education is entwined in the fabric of democracy dedicated to intellectual freedom and justice.

Over the years the grand tradition of American public education has been challenged, criticized, modified, reformed, blasphemed, examined, studied, reviewed, simplified, and debated. At the same time it has grown, expanded, improved, and become an increasingly vital part of the American social and economic life. Today American public education is so important that it is the topic of discussion in every city and hamlet of our nation. It is the topic of conversation at every level of gov-

ernment, among writers and newscasters; and it is cursed or blessed by men and women in every walk of life. That it has been so successful as a protectorate of democracy is what confounds and irritates detractors. This is what the highly respected writer, Fred Hechinger, said about our schools:

> Like all other key institutions, the public schools have had their periods of triumph and their times of crisis. They have been celebrated and damned; imitated abroad and underestimated at home; allowed to drift, only to be revived again by reforms. Through it all, they have kept alive a spirit that accomplished what other societies rarely thought possible: expanding opportunities for each new generation of children, regardless of their origin, whether born of American parents or newly arrived immigrants. (1983, p. 29)

The grand American tradition began with Jefferson's ideal of an aristocracy of talent and not of inherited wealth and privilege. It was fueled by the missionary rhetoric of early reformers who saw schools as a way to give everyone an equal chance, who looked on education as the balance wheel of society. To them, free public education was an inspired idea supported by God himself; and the celestial challenge was to build a schoolhouse and a church in every village, town, and hamlet in the country.

The tradition is the American Dream to millions of immigrants who want a better life for their children. It is the torch that motivates the peoples of the world to find freedom, equity, and prosperity in a strange, new nation called the United States of America. It is the so-

cial vehicle to give greater opportunity to the displaced people of our own nation — women, minorities, handicapped, and the alienated.

Public schools have contributed to economic growth, to social mobility, and to solving every problem our nation has encountered. No other institution has served so well for so little in such a short time. Schools are and will continue to be the basis for social and political safety and stability. Visit any nation in the world, from Japan to Italy, China to Chile, and you will soon know that public education in the United States is the envy of every parent wishing for a better future for all children. That's why so many of them want their children to be educated in the United States.

The book of Proverbs maintains, "where there is no vision, a people perish." That vision for equality, common sense, traditional norms, unity of purpose, and hope for the future is maintained, nurtured, and held sacred for generation after generation by public education. In the United States our schools preserve and transmit the principles that have made this nation the most coveted place in which to live. By supporting public education, we can continue to look forward to a challenging and prosperous new millennium. With assistance from Lincoln, it may be said that future generations will little remember the various critics of public education; but the success of our schools will be etched in the minds, hearts, and souls of each student who passes through the schoolhouse gate. Our vision is clear, to establish in every classroom an educational standard that provides educational experiences for all children, ex-

periences that the "best and wisest parents" want for their own children (Dewey 1949).

Public Education and Social Mobility

Through a variety of professional and national publications, we hear and read various analyses of how demographics, financial resources, test scores, and other important factors have influenced the performance of students and the overall perception of the success of public education. Over these past 12 months, we have read the "discussion and re-discussion" of this year's trends — the "what's hot and what's not" in public education. We can examine the indicators of performance that "someone" believes is meaningful and interesting to parents and the general public. Ultimately, these reports and articles conclude with recommendations that "someone" should take to build on the progress made to eliminate barriers that stand in the way of greater academic progress. We hear that some believe that America's public schools are failing or that we ought to be educating our children for a different future, for the "millennial seismic societal shift."

Indeed, there are complex and varied changes taking place locally, nationally, and globally. Each of these

changes not only require our attention, but also demand our leadership. So how do we align and measure the impact and influence of public education on social mobility? Social mobility has evidenced various milestones throughout our history. Funding allocated to our veterans for education after World War II allowed many citizens to upgrade their social status and economic level. National defense money has assisted public schools in improving teacher education through national defense college grants and curriculum development in the schools.

The 1960s generated a major infusion of funds to assist poor and economically disadvantaged children at the local school level. Major support for curricular change and school support for public school children from state and federal funds have provided a more equitable distribution of funds throughout our nation, resulting in higher graduation rates, more skilled workers, and higher education levels.

As a result of increased resources, we see more children achieving higher levels of education and many families with children moving upward in social and economic status in our society. The importance of continuing education opportunities through our schools is yet another indicator of resources that must be provided in order for our democracy to continue to succeed. A nation of "haves and have-nots" will not provide these outcomes. To sustain our national security and promulgate our values, we must provide opportunities for our children to continue succeeding beyond our accomplishments.

Gary Marx recently worked with a number of leaders of the Educational Research Service (ERS) Schools of the Future Council. These leaders represented education, government, nonpublic agencies, public and private sector businesses, and other organizations, all coming together to write an easy reference version of "the significant trends that educators and education organizations will want to give close attention." These leaders indicated that they see these trends as "powerful forces at work in the 21st century American society impacting social mobility." As we consider what really matters about public education and social mobility — the common measures, vital signs, and arguments of how to guide our republic — let us briefly consider 10 trends as an "Investor's Guide to Education." The trends and shifts defined by ERS that will have influence on the results of public education and influence social mobility are:

1. For the first time in history, the old will outnumber the young.
2. The country will become a nation of minorities.
3. Social and intellectual capital will become the primary economic values in society.
4. Education will shift from averages to individuals.
5. The Millennial Generation will insist on solutions to accumulated problems and injustices.
6. Continuous improvement and collaboration will replace quick fixes and defense of the status quo.
7. Technology will increase the speed of communication and the pace of advancement or decline.

8. Knowledge creation and breakthrough thinking will stir a new era of enlightenment.
9. Scientific discoveries and societal realities will force difficult ethical choices.
10. Competition will increase as industries and professions intensify their efforts to attract and keep talented people.

And so we are reminded of the inherent interdependence between education level and social mobility. Allen Bloom might have referenced these 10 trends as the shared activities that infuse, define, delimit, and encompass American life. The real message in Bloom's work, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), is that education touches and connects us all; education is a shared trust. We must not lose our shared cultural and historical tradition, our knowledge of why and who we are, or our connectedness and social interdependency. Now more than ever before, we must clearly see the connection between an unemployed 16-year-old high school dropout and a retired social security beneficiary only steps from a street corner mugging. David Funk points out in "Championing the Value of Education" that "this connection is just as complex as the international comparison between per capita productivity rates in the auto industry which are a function of worker skills and educational background."

As Americans, we prize self-sufficiency; but it is our mutual economic and social dependency on education that makes our schools a public trust. Public education is a shared trust, a national investment. It is, as Hubert

Humphrey once said, "the highest yield investment this nation can make."

During the past decade the social value of education has climbed steadily as a national priority. Education has gone from a local or state activity to a national priority. The business community understands that the effectiveness of education for the United States makes a major difference in whether we maintain the lead economic position in the world. If we are to remain competitive, we must pay for quality education, get tangible results, and realize that championing an investment in education will pay both social and economic dividends. We might even say it does not matter whether one supports education out of fear of a decreasing Gross National Product or because of a belief in education's intellectual empowerment. Both supporters will profit from their investment.

Education plays a critical role in society's financial health and prosperity even though it remains difficult to quantify our investment in social terms or to calculate a meaningful annual rate of return. The breadth and measure of education's effect on society is dramatic. The average college graduate's $15,000 to $20,000 investment in a four-year university degree will yield on average $380,000 to $400,000 more in lifetime earnings than a high school graduate would earn. Equally as dramatic is the figure that 82% of the prisoners in the United States are high school dropouts, each of whom costs taxpayers approximately $34,000 a year to incarcerate. Currently in Hayward, California, we are spending $5,800 a year per average daily attendance or $2,800 per year for Head

Start — one-tenth the cost of incarcerating a prisoner for a year.

The social benefits of our education investment — whether GNP growth, lowered crime rate, or improved social consciousness, validate the investment of our taxes. "A dollar invested in Head Start is about eight dollars in jails you don't need to build, drug detox centers you don't have to staff," says Harold Hodgkinson (1997). A major cost associated with underinvestment in education is the cost of crime, "the correlation between high school dropout and prisoner rates remains still higher than the correlation between smoking and lung cancer." Hodgkinson found a strong correlation between high school graduation rates and per-capita prison populations. For instance, Minnesota continues to have one of the highest graduation rates at 92.8% and is ranked second lowest in prisoners per 100,000. North Dakota, with one of the lowest per-capita crime rates in the country, has the third-highest high school graduation rate. At the other end of the continuum is Florida, with perhaps the nation's worst graduation rate and the highest per capita incarceration population in the United States. Education's vital effect on social mobility seems clear: We cannot, as a nation, afford to ignore the relationship between a lack of education and criminal activity.

A high-quality educational experience and high-quality outcome for every student are perhaps education's most critical challenges. They also are education's greatest opportunity to affect social mobility. The changing U.S. demographics continue to show that mi-

nority youth are quickly becoming the majority, yet they have a dropout rate that is 62% higher than that of white students. It is clear that we must offer a high-quality educational experience for all students, with no excuses or exceptions, if we are each to be productive and survive in a nation where one of every three of us is non-white and will require a minimum of two years of higher education to be economically successful.

The widening gap in U.S. social mobility and income distribution also stems from the inability of one-fifth of the population to compete in the workplace of the new millennium. The marketplace continues to splinter into distinct parts. Wide gaps are appearing between low-level jobs and jobs requiring higher-level thinking and technical skills. If we don't boost the skills of the bottom ranks, we will have a more divided society than we do now. We must bolster the skill levels of all students to empower the previously disenfranchised and to create a more robust economy with social mobility.

The bottom line of social mobility: "A well-formed education enables people to understand their role, their history, and see through dysfunctional cultural traditions," says Chet Bowers, University of Oregon professor. Theodore Hesburgh, recently president of the University of Notre Dame, said:

> Education provides the tools to better understand the complex question of what it means to be human and in turn empowers individuals to move themselves and thus society ever forward toward that ideal. An educated citizenry can completely function in a democracy — because knowledge enlarges and enriches us in add-

ition to forming our world perspectives and political/social orientation.

The foundation of liberal democratic government has always been a rational, well-educated public. John Stuart Mills' work, *On Liberty,* reminds us all of "the fundamental requirement of education in a democratic society." It is clear that lack of education can leave many U.S. citizens unprepared for workplace demands and ill-equipped to effectively participate in democracy.

Public Education and the Quality of Life

Thomas Jefferson stated, "To be poorly educated is to be condemned to a life of unfilled potential. An individual that hopes to be ignorant and free, hopes for something that never was and never will be."

When you speak with most people regarding the importance education has had in their life, they often emphasize the opportunities that education provides. I believe they actually are referring to personal freedom — daily economic, philosophical, political, and social choices they have to which they are empowered to respond with an often-narrowed range of options. Certainly, the argument can be raised that if education is considered essential to individual freedom by those possessing it, should it not then be an inalienable right for all? Or as cited earlier by W.E.B. Du Bois, "Public education is perhaps the most fundamental civil right." Countries such as Great Britain, Germany, and others have instituted an Economic and Educational Bill of Rights to guarantee inalienable such rights as quality housing, food, higher education, and the opportunity to work.

Ken Hunsaher, School Administrator from Bethel School District in Eugene, Oregon, reminds freshmen each year that education is the key to a person's future. "It's not how strong you are anymore, but how informed, knowledgeable, and able to communicate. In terms of earning power, educated people will be able to respond to the whims of the workplace. As you consider making changes in life, you must respond through increasing skills. This requires a strong base in education. My investment in education goes beyond dollars. The circle I have access to socially, professionally, and politically is entirely due to my education."

The high school student pondering dropping out must realize the reduced opportunities that can result from lost earning power. A high school student can forfeit as much as $225,000 in lifetime earnings by not finishing high school. Similarly, he or she can lose in excess of $650,000 by not gaining a bachelor's degree. Advancement in education means money!

U.S. high schools and colleges offer the best rate of return on this investment — and their interest rate just keeps getting better. Today more than ever, the decision to leave school is difficult to justify on economic terms at virtually any stage through graduate school — virtually indefensible any year before the end of high school.

As we strive as a nation to improve the quality of life for all American citizens, we must strengthen the public education opportunities available to all people.

Challenges of finance, politics, and ethnic achievement gaps cannot deter us from improving and providing

greater opportunities through public education. As mentioned earlier, there have been comparisons between law enforcement officials and public school teachers as to their status in our society. Without safety and security and an educated citizenry, our democracy cannot succeed or survive. Yet in recent years, distrust and disrespect has been prevalent toward police officials and public school teachers. If these stakeholders are our hope to continuing our democratic society, then support, trust, and respect must return. Our public education system does have a critical role in teaching values, ethics, and good citizenship. If our public schools provide the curriculum to instruct our children in these areas, our new educated citizens can maintain this great democracy.

Defend the Tower!

The time has come for us to defend the tower! Education has endured the broad criticism of politicians, newspaper columnists, CEO's, and college-circuit speakers. The public schools of this nation have served us well. They have been the backbone of our country, the soul of our people, and the protectors of democracy.

Current attacks on our schools arise from frustration, confusion, social issues, economic limitations, and disillusion with life itself. These are unjustified attacks made often from ignorance and one's inability to understand and appreciate the previous lessons of American history.

This defense is without apology. It emerges from loyalty to American public education. This defense represents a plea for all educators to defend the tower. If we do not do it, high-quality education is in jeopardy, as is the American dream for equal opportunity and equal justice.

The time has come for all of us who are associated with public education to defend our schools' purposes, their integrity, and their massive contributions to a noble experiment, an accomplishment equaled by no other

nation on the face of this earth. It is time that legislators, teachers, administrators, board members, and college professors speak forcefully against those who unjustly weaken our schools, who criticize without validity and reason, who are unreasonable in their expectations of what schools can and cannot do, and who sap our strength by making us defensive every time we attend a conference, read a newspaper, or view the evening news.

What is at stake is the future of American public education itself; its very existence is in mortal danger. The American dream may be lost, and few seem to care. Where is the modern day Horace Mann? Where is the articulate young Jefferson extolling the virtues of education? Where is the practical neo-Benjamin Franklin? Where are the voices who once placed their lives, their fortunes, and their dreams on public education? Must Jonathan Kozol become a voice in the wilderness, or will he be joined by a massive movement to defend the tower? Here is the status of public education as reported by the Center on Education Policy and American Youth Policy Forum (2000):

- Mathematics and science education results are improving.
- SAT and ACT scores are up.
- More students are enrolled in Advanced Placement classes.
- High school students are taking more advanced courses.
- Fewer students are dropping out of school.
- More girls are taking higher-level courses.

- More students with disabilities are educated in regular education classrooms.
- Significant educational gains are being made by minority students.

Like all organizations, we have our limitations, our shortcomings, and our share of incompetence. But compared by any criteria of service, we have done our work well and at an extremely low cost to the American taxpayer. American public education has sustained the hopes of our people and fortified our dreams. It has made it possible for millions to develop their talents and share the nation's affluence. Our schools are alive and doing well. They will continue to survive and prevail.

The truth is that today's schools are better than ever before. Most children learn more, learn faster, and do almost everything better than their parents did. Most of today's children are better writers, better spellers, better historians, better mathematicians, and better readers than any previous group of children in the history of our nation. The fact that so many people can write books about teaching and learning is sufficient evidence that the public educators have taught many people to write well. Similarly, the fact that today millions of books are read by millions of people indicates that schools had something to do with teaching widespread interest in reading. No other nation in the world reads as much material as we do. If all those children can't read, why are they buying so much reading material?

Those who are critical of schools have a strange way of comparing apples and oranges. "When I was in high

school," they say, "children could read. That isn't true today." The fact may be that in previous decades most of those who could not read would not get into high school. Only about 60% were in high school 50 years ago. Today nearly 96% of eligible youngsters are in high school. If we compare today's top 20% with those top 20% who were in high school in 1950, the present students would be bigger, healthier, more intelligent, faster, better readers, and educated better at almost anything they do. Similarly, those who are now in school are better than those who dropped out of school. The fact that a wider range of students is in school is no reason to conclude that the schools are not as effective for all students as they once were. The critics compare apples to oranges and go bananas over the data.

What other institution in our society costs so little? The average cost of a one-day stay in the hospital is a minimum of $500. To keep a person in jail for one year costs more than $30,000. Taking care of a student in a detention facility costs the public at least $20,000 per year. We educate children in this country for an average of $6,500 per year, or less than $37 per day. With such unpredictable and limited financial support, schools cannot meet the educational needs of every child. To teach the most atypical child costs $100,000 per year. Our schools will never have that much to spend, and therefore some children will not maximize their potential and their success in school. However, most students are more successful in school than they are in detention homes or jails.

We have done many things extremely well. Let the record show what our schools have accomplished:

- They have educated millions of immigrants and have forged a common ideal from extreme diversity.
- They have educated the poor, the disadvantaged, the undermotivated; and they have done it reasonably well.
- They have made this nation one of the most literate in the world.
- They have found success with more than 90% of the children who enter their classrooms.
- They have helped to preserve the personal liberties of the people.
- They have been the keeper of the American dream.
- They have maintained higher public confidence than other social institutions.
- They have learned to cope with more and more difficult students, situations, and conditions.
- They have educated the handicapped, the gifted, the average; and they have succeeded with most of them.

For the record let's also read what has been said about American public education in letters from respected individuals to one of the authors.

- T.H. Bell. "Our schools are for everyone. No one is excluded. We teach them all — and we do a fine job, often under difficult circumstances."
- F.H. Hechinger. "The American public must be made aware of the link between public schools and

political democracy. The place of public education in American history is one of our best-kept secrets."

- R.W. Tyler. "Public education has espoused and supported the concept of an open society and has furnished opportunities for social mobility to an extent that is unprecedented in human history."
- David Tyack. "The openness of our system is one of its great virtues. That's what's right with our public schools."
- John Dunworth. "No other institution, no other profession, has served our nation as well as public schools."

Make no mistake, the critics are active and forceful. They have leverage, as education costs continue to increase. They make hay out of negotiations and teacher strikes. They ridicule the reforms of the 1990s and the new millennium. They appear to have logic on their side when discussing international test scores. They have been most successful in California, where support for public education has been nearly destroyed.

It is absolutely clear that the level of criticism has increased sharply in the last few years. It is clear also that criticism is coming from all directions, particularly from fiscal conservatives. What is not clear is why we have not become more concerned about the possible destruction of public education. Why have we not defended the tower? Unless we do so, our schools may become the scapegoats for all our social ills.

Even worse, if this trend continues, the public schools will be left with the most deprived, as they were a century ago.

Let the critics write their distorted books, but let the truth be known. Public educators have served well and with distinction and honor. Public educators have been positive, optimistic, articulate, and confident. In the midst of the hurricane of criticism, we must sit in the eye and stand strong in the teeth of the gale. We must always believe that our course is indestructible.

It is time that each of us defends the tower. In doing so, we defend America itself.

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